Bioversity International

Book of Abstracts

11th IFDC PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP IV

Biodiversity for improved nutrition and health: The critical role of food composition in decision making for agriculture and nutrition programming and policy

02 November 2015 - Hyderabad, India

Biodiversity Interventions an Insurance Against Nutrition and Health Security

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Biodiversity both cultivated and in wild including livestock has been intimately associated with diet, nutrition, health and economy of the agriculture households both directly and indirectly. This interdependence is more pronounced in the dryland agriculture system, as the available biodiversity is limited and in turn limiting the food basket. To have an in depth knowledge and identify the appropriate windows for interventions, an Agricultural biodiversity base line survey was conducted in three states of India involving 874 families of 15 villages and families belonging to six districts where dryland farming is the main livelihood of the farmers of these villages. The survey indicated that households derive their dietary material mainly from what they grow and also what is commonly available in the nearby markets. Because of the limitation of the variety of the raw material for diet preparation due to seasonal cropping , denudation of the common land from wild species, low livestock population etc., the majority of the population in general and women and children in particular suffer from the undernutrition, malnutrition and deficiency of the minerals and vitamins. Most of the children and women were found anemic and weak. To mitigate the problem and also support the dietary source, Bioversity international has started activities to supplement and support building a nutrient-rich biodiversity base through distributing and planting drought resistant fruit species with required technologies. The important species and varieties distributed include Ber (Ziziphus mouriatiana); Sapota (Manilkera Zapota); Jamun (Syzygium cuminii); Guava (Psidium guajva); Pomegranate (Punica granatum); Drumstick (Moringa pterigosperma); Sweet soup (Annona squamosa); Jack (Artocarpus heterophyllus); Indian ghoose berry (Phyllanthus emblica) etc, with 3-4 varieties in each. As backward linkage to produce and supply quality planting material, a mother plant Exsitu gene bank and a nursery have been started. A step forward, community seed banks to be run by the local women self-help groups is also envisaged for assured availability of quality planting and seed material and economic sustainability. It is sincerely hoped this initiative will help in achieving its objectives and becomes a successful model to replicate.